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AUTHOR Whipple, Michele
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ABSTRACT

A year-long naturalistic case study investigated teacher-initiated change efforts in language arts by examining the experiences and influences of a single sixth-grade teacher. The teacher was observed in multiple contexts (both in and out of her school), interacting with varying groups of individuals, not all of which were located within the district boundaries. Data included field notes with interpretive comments; audiotapes of class lessons and discussions; reflective pieces written by the teacher; classroom, school, and district documents; interviews with the focus teacher and other stakeholders (peers, administrators, parents, and children); and population data on the school and district. Results indicated that (1) the teacher never truly acted alone in either planning or implementation of her language arts changes; (2) teacher-initiated change efforts were non-linear due to the social nature of planning and implementing initiatives; (3) epistemological beliefs were dependent upon the results of experimentation with new methods and materials; (4) change in this context was a complex web of experiences and influences, not all of which were acknowledged by the teacher; (5) the self-initiated change efforts of the teacher were socially constructed; and (6) all stakeholders and information sources did not carry the same weight in the teacher's decision making and change planning. Findings suggest that change is a social process involving an interactive body of people, events, and feedback resulting from experiences. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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Unraveling a Web of Change: A Case Study of Factors Affecting the Self-Initiated Changes of One Sixth Grade Language Arts Teacher

Michele Whipple
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville

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> Everything and everybody is connected. Everything affects everything else. No matter how different, no matter how far away, we are all part of an interconnected whole. . . the fact is that no real division can be found between ourselves, other people, and the world around us - *unless we create it in our minds.*
>
> (Land and Jarman, 1992, p. 104)

Introduction:

Over the past two decades, numerous research studies have investigated the origins, implementation, and effectiveness of reforms in language arts education (e.g., Courtland, 1992; Duffy & Roehler, 1986; Hancock & Hill, 1988; Maguire, 1990; Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989). These studies have generally fallen into three categories: those which focus on the implementation of mandated reform initiatives and teachers' reactions to them; those in which teachers have been either directly or indirectly trained in specified methods in order to study their use; and, more recently, those which examine teacher-initiated change efforts in naturally occurring contexts.

Studies found in the first two categories have dominated during this period and still remain prevalent in some research paradigms today. The focus of these studies has been on the actual implementation of reforms

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mandated upon teachers, the physical products of these mandates and why they have or have not been realized. For the most part, very little emphasis has been placed on the processes of change for individual teachers and how they are affected by their contexts, experiences, or personal beliefs. This has also been true of the majority of studies focusing on teacher-initiated change. Hence, this study was designed to gain further insight into these areas.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate teacher-initiated change efforts in language arts by examining the experiences of a single teacher and their influences through a case study approach. The focus teacher, "Julie," was interested in attempting many of the language arts change initiatives outlined by this study long before I approached her about possible participation in this study. She had already attempted numerous alterations of her language arts assessments and had several more ideas "in the works," in this, as well as other areas of her program. Therefore, working with Julie provided me with the valuable experience of being able to observe the natural occurrence of deliberate change as initiated by a single teacher.

Because a phenomenological approach (Lincoln, 1992; Patton, 1990) to investigating this teachers' individual change efforts, with its emphasis on the influence of experiences, was implemented throughout all stages of this study, efforts were made to "search for and uncover deeper social structures and the larger connections between inner life and the outer world" (Lincoln, 1992, p. 91). These efforts required a deeper look into the effects of context conditions and stakeholders on the individual lives and realities of this teacher. As a result, not only did this study attempt to examine the end-products of change, including feedback from the various stakeholders within the teacher's professional context, but also the origins, influences, and various forms which the idea(s) took on before a change was made.

Focus questions guiding the planning, data collection, and analysis for this study were as follows:

1) What are the changes attempted by this teacher in order to modify her literature-based language arts program and what directions do they take?

2) Who and what influence the directions of this teacher's change initiatives?

3) How do theory, practice, and beliefs interact as this teacher plans and implements these changes?

4) What are the consequences of these changes for this teacher's program, relationships with colleagues and her professional identity?

Methodology:

This year long, naturalistic case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) took place in a suburban district and focused on the various processes involved in teacher-initiated change efforts of a single, sixth grade classroom teacher, "Julie." My role within this context was primarily that of a participant observer (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984).

The teacher was observed in multiple contexts (both in and out of her school), and interacting with varying groups of individuals (e.g., students, parents, colleagues, and administrators), not all of which were located within the district boundaries (i.e., local and national professional conferences). Data sources included: field notes with interpretive comments; audio tapes of class lessons and discussions; reflective pieces written by the teacher; classroom, school and district documents; interviews with the focus teacher and other stakeholders (peers, administrators, parents, and children); and population

data on the school and district. This data was qualitatively analyzed using the constant comparison method.

The primary unit of analysis for this study was an individual language arts program component within which changes occurred. In this study, changes were described as those alterations made by Julie in the instructional and assessment practices of her language arts program. This study highlights those alterations made by Julie in her teaching methods, materials, organization, and assessment. The depth and expansiveness of the information gathered allowed for the construction of a "thick description" (Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the teacher's professional context, and the various stages preceding (origin, intent, influences on), during the implementation of, and following (feedback to) her change initiatives.

Once the language arts components where changes were taking place were identified, I attempted to relate each of the experiences I was sharing as a participant observer in Julie's professional context to them. As I began to reconstruct these changes, I noticed that within this context a single change in instruction or assessment was actually comprised of numerous experiences involving not only Julie, but also other stakeholders. I began to view these experiences as the primary and secondary events leading up to a particular change within a specific language arts component. Thus, for the purposes of this study, an event was an observable experience involving the teacher and various combinations of stakeholders and information sources within her professional context.

Following the identification of the language arts components, the changes which were occurring within each of them, and the relevant events, I incorporated the related antecedent or historical data (Stake, 1967). This

combination of information, all related to the changes taking place within an individual component of Julie's language arts program, joined together to form six individual episodes. The names of these episodes correspond with six of the seven components of Julie's language arts program (i.e., spelling, guided reading, optional reading, journals, discussion, and self-assessment), those six where change was taking place. These episodes were both narratively and illustratively mapped in order to unravel the stakeholder, information source, and historical threads which had meshed together to create them. This act also allowed for examination of any stakeholder feedback which had been received in relation to a particular change, how it was received by Julie, subsequent alterations which were made, and finally, how the event contributed to Julie's attempts to realize the language arts program she envisioned.

Findings:

The results of this study suggest that the focus teacher, Julie, never truly acted alone in either the planning or implementation of her language arts changes, reinforcing earlier findings from a 1987 study conducted by Schon. Throughout the study, an interactive web of stakeholders, organizational constraints, and influences, which were often not easily visible (such as the history of language arts in the district and the district's unspoken beliefs on teacher behavior), influenced the shape of Julie's changes and the extent to which they were executed. My observations of these interactions have led me to view change in this context as a construction involving multiple participants, information sources, and organizational structures.

In addition, I have not only come to see that these influences are intertwined and consistently present in the research context, but that the

extent to which they affected Julie's decisions concerning her language arts program was varied. The manner in which these stakeholders, information sources and organizational structures fit together is best illustrated when thought of as the interconnected threads of a spider's web. Each of the individual threads is essential to the unique shape or form of the web, or in this case, Julie's professional context. In addition, no two webs are exactly alike. Looking across the changes made within the language arts components highlighted by this study (e.g., spelling, guided reading, optional reading, journals, discussion, self-assessment) no single thread was equally as influential in two or more different change initiatives.

As the phenomenological nature of this study suggests, we are influenced by those who reside in the world around us, as well as societal rules and expectations. According to Schutz, all people "carry in their minds rules, social recipes, conceptions of appropriate conduct, and other information which allows them to act in their social world," (cited in Turner, 1986, p. 329). The combination of these implicit and explicit guidelines, rules, and boundaries collectively form what Schutz refers to as our "stock knowledge." As all of us, including Julie, interact with those around us we draw on our stock knowledge to aid us in our interactions with others and to help us to interpret our experiences (Turner, 1986).

If stock knowledge guides our thinking, actions, and interpretations, then we are never quite alone in our decision making even as individual teachers in self-contained classrooms. Often teachers interact directly with the stakeholders in their professional contexts, as has been illustrated in this study. Such interactions have a telling effect on how changes in this language arts program were planned (and, if they actually ever got to the planning stages) and manifested themselves in Julie's classroom. Finally, the existence

of stock knowledge suggests that even when we are physically alone, in our classrooms with the door shut, our decisions are affected by those who reside beyond the classroom door.

This study reinforces the belief that we are continually referencing that portion of our stock knowledge which contains the history of our relationships with other stakeholders, the definition of our position within the context, and attempting to "read" the reactions of others to our actions. We use this internal feedback, or as Vygotsky (1978) calls it "inner dialogue," to monitor the reactions of others and to aid us in forming acceptable actions and experiences. As explained by Vygotsky, "Every function in cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people, and then inside. . . all higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (p. 46).

For Julie, this "larger interconnected whole" included (but was not limited to) her broader professional context. During the course of this study, Julie was found to be influenced to varying degrees by the people and events of this context. And, while Julie was often able to identify and acknowledge these influences in connection with her individual change efforts, there were also instances when they exerted their influence silently. To Julie these stakeholders, information sources, and events just appeared to be threads of the ever-changing pattern of the context. As a result, I often observed changes in Julie's language arts program for which she could not identify the source(s), but for which I, as an outside observer, having witnessed the initiating events, planning, implementation, feedback, and revisions of entire episodes was able to see.

In addition to the findings above, data analysis also revealed the following:

(a) Teacher-initiated change efforts in this context were non-linear due to the social nature of planning and implementing initiatives.

(b) In this context, epistemological beliefs were shown to be dependent upon the results of experimentation with new methods and materials. As a result, practice was often likely to change before philosophical or theoretical commitments were made.

(c) It was shown that change in this context, is a complex web of experiences and influences, not all of which are acknowledged by the change initiator. Change efforts were initiated, shaped and implemented as a result of the unique combination of interactive elements found in the research context.

(d) The self-initiated change efforts of this sixth grade teacher were socially constructed. Change was shown in this context to occur as the direct and indirect result of the teacher's experiences with context stakeholders and the meaning which she constructed from them.

(e) All stakeholders and information sources in this context did not carry the same weight in the teacher's decision making and change planning.

In conclusion, from the point of view of this study, change is a social process. It is an interactive body of people, events and feedback resulting from our experiences. Contextual elements become influences on our future actions, some of which are foregrounded and have a larger and more direct impact, while others remain in the background. Therefore, not only are movements towards change in language arts instruction coming from the teachers who affect change directly in their classrooms, but also from the peers, students, parents, and the larger district and government efforts found in the broader context of an individual teacher. These findings further suggest

that the acknowledgment of this social characteristic is a necessary step towards further understanding the why's and how's of lasting educational change.

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